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By Gerry O'Hanlon, S.J.

John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* charts the deep anger of Ethan Allen Hawley in coming to terms with downward social mobility. At the end of the novel, Steinbeck says: "When a condition or problem becomes too great, humans have the protection of not thinking about it but it goes inside and what comes out is discontent." (I thank Dr. Niamh Hourigan, *The Irish Times*, Saturday, February 25, 2017, for this reference.)

The anger and discontent that were instrumental in the election of President Donald Trump have been evident in Europe since at least the beginning of the Great Recession in 2008. In the wake of the unfairness and growing inequality revealed by the recession, there has emerged a range of new political actors from the far left to the radical right – think of Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the Labour Party in Britain under Jeremy Corbyn, and, at the other end of the spectrum, Marine Le Pen and the Front National in France, Geert Wilders and the Freedom Party in the Netherlands, AFD (Alternatives for Germany) in Germany, UKIP in Britain, and developments in Poland and Hungary and elsewhere. While these right-wing parties in particular are not homogenous, there is a common thread of hostility to elites, opposition to European integration, economic nationalism, and anti-immigration (in particular anti-Muslim immigration) running through them. Britain has voted to leave the European Union (Brexit), while without doubt the most significant achievement of radical right populism globally was the election of President Trump and his post-election repudiation of many of the accepted political norms of behaviour.

The temptation for educated, middle-class people may be simply to decry the uncivilized nature of the new politics and to deny the root causes which give rise to such deplorable symptoms. This has not been the way of Pope Francis – he goes to root causes, and again and again he has urged us to say "no" to an economic model that favors exclusion and inequality and has urged us to accept that "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental" (*Laudato Si', 139).* Similarly, the Special Report drawn up by a group of international Jesuit scholars and colleagues entitled *Justice in the Global Economy* (2016), drawing on the diagnosis of Francis, urges us to pool our resources in order to retrieve a vision of the common good, in which solidarity is a defining characteristic. In other words, we are called to face up to the grim situation that confronts us, not simply deplore or deny it, and attempt to put it right. Real-

ity needs to be understood and responded to well; otherwise it comes back to bite us. But how might this be done?

Several lines of thought suggest themselves. First, I note in the decrees that have emerged from the recent General Congregation 36 of the Jesuits (see Decrees I and 2 in particular) quite a pronounced emphasis on communal discernment. At its best, in the current situation, that might involve a gathering together of committed and thoughtful people who, always in dialogue with those who are suffering most, are poor, are discontent, would try to diagnose the present crisis more accurately and take even small steps at the local level to bring about a more just situation. Prayer, in this context, would involve asking for the freedom to face the situation honestly, not to be reactive, to listen to other views, and to follow up with appropriate decision and action.

Second, it might involve (as *Justice in the Global Economy* urges) a harnessing of our Jesuit resources at an institutional (primarily university) level, in cooperation with others, believers and non-believers, so as to think through the causes of our present crisis and to begin to imagine an alternative economic and social paradigm. It may be no coincidence that the countries which were in the vanguard of the adoption of the neo-liberal economic model, the United States and Britain, with the financialization of our economies and the de-regulation which led to growing inequality and class dissatisfaction, are now laboring under considerable political disarray. However that may be, we need to free ourselves from the kind of tyranny over our imaginations exercised by that dark and idolatrous form of transcendence which we have accorded to the failed God of the Markets, the tyranny of "there is no alternative" articulated by Margaret Thatcher. In this context ideas are important; we need to search for new ideas, new ways of organizing our national societies and global society. Arguably President Trump and more extreme elements in Europe have been correct in identifying and hence respecting real discontent in the United States and in Europe, while more main-line politicians, however gifted and otherwise admirable, have been overly complacent and dismissive of popular protest. But many of the solutions of President Trump and his fellow travellers are not just wholly inadequate, they are also deeply inhumane. A more adequate political response will emerge only if we listen carefully to the voices of protest, analyse the problems carefully, and begin, imaginatively, to come up with new ideas and models which politicians can seek to test with the electorate.

Third, we need to resist the temptation to plead helplessness and incapacity – I can't find a group to discern with, I don't know any poor people, I'm not the one to come up with the Big Idea to solve the present crisis in capitalism. Rather, as journalist Malcolm Gladwell and others have well observed, the small and local have an immense capacity to bring about change on a larger scale; the enrichment of civil society and the civic public square with intelligent, fair discourse from people committed to a more just and humanly flourishing society can only be good for us all; the "solidarity of small steps" is significant in that Long March through our institutions that is required. In particular public discourse in our "post-truth" society has been become thinner and more coarse with the prominence of sloganizing, fake news and "alternative facts": we need to form pockets of resistance, drawing on our rich cultural and religious heritage, so as to forge a more robust counter-narrative.

Here in Ireland, in a headspace often midway between Boston and Berlin, not to mention London, we are conscious of the words of W. B. Yeats in "The Second Coming" (written in 1919, just after the end of the first World War) that "...the centre cannot hold" and that "...the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." But Yeats goes on to hope that "...surely some revelation is at hand; surely the Second Coming is at hand" and to ask "...what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born." This latter note recalls the observation of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney that there can be times when "hope and history rhyme." There are choices to be made: which of the Ignatian Two Standards do we choose; can we use this time of crisis to channel discontent and anger into something more constructive for us all?

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